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Dear Dr Wratten

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 5 and 6 July 2011 to look at work in art, craft and design.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design is outstanding.

Achievement in art, craft and design

Achievement in art, craft and design is outstanding.

- Students' attainment and quality of work are high in each key stage and the great majority of students make at least good, and sometimes outstanding, progress.
- Examination results in GCSE art and textiles have risen steadily and are consistently above national averages. In the most recent year, the proportion of students achieving A* and A grades has risen sharply and is well above average. While boys' results have also improved overall, the proportion achieving the highest grades remains lower than for girls. The most recent results in AS and A-level subjects indicate above average achievement with some exceptionally high results in photography.

- Students work confidently with a wide range of media and techniques and often on a large scale. From the start of Year 7, they develop a sound understanding of formal elements, colour, pictorial space and three-dimensional form. This is developed further in Year 8, evident in the strong colours, bold shapes and creative use of mixed media in work developed from studying paintings by Jasper Johns. In Year 9, when students start their GCSE courses, the very strong emphasis on developing practical skills and broadening contextual understanding prepares students well to work independently on more personalised projects in Year 10.
- The development of analytical, reflective and critical skills is a particular strength. Teachers provide a very clear structure for analysis and evaluation from Year 7 onwards, so that students become increasingly confident and adept in analysing and evaluating artists' work in depth, and in reflecting critically on strengths and areas for improvement in their own work. Students make excellent use of their close study of other artists' and photographers' work, for example, through copies and transcriptions, learning about use of technique, materials and formal elements. Students apply this knowledge and understanding thoughtfully in their own work.
- Most students thoroughly enjoy the subject, valuing creative and expressive approaches and opportunities for personal choices about the work they make. Sixth form students have a very good understanding of how skills developed through their art work, such as planning, research, analysis, and managing project work and their time, will be useful to them in future life and work.

Quality of teaching in art, craft and design

The quality of teaching in art, craft and design is outstanding.

- Teaching is consistently at least good, and often outstanding. Teachers are enthusiastic and very committed to the subject. They make highly effective use of their strong subject knowledge and personal experiences to inspire students and introduce them to a wide range of art and design work, including that of less well-known and contemporary practitioners.
- Teachers effectively develop students' ability to think and work independently, often using open and extended questioning very well to draw out students' ideas and opinions, enabling them to learn collaboratively. For example, in a lesson on analysing art work, the teacher skilfully elicited students' ideas on key concepts and questions to ask about a piece of work. This was built up into a well-structured framework, which students recorded in their sketchbooks to support future analysis. The teacher and students together constructed a well-written, fluent exemplar to support students' writing on artists and their work.
- Very regular teacher and peer assessment and feedback makes a significant contribution to students' learning and progress. Students in Key Stage 3 receive feedback on every piece of work, as well as formal assessment at the end of a project. GCSE and A-level students receive interim feedback during projects and detailed feedback at the end, with clear guidance on how to improve their work and achieve higher grades.

The integration of personal learning and thinking skills into planning and assessment further enhances students' creative and reflective practice and independence.

Quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design

The quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design is good.

- Staff revise the curriculum regularly, to meet changing internal and external requirements, and to refresh and improve provision. Projects in Key Stage 3 provide good opportunities for students to work in two- and three-dimensions and explore a variety of subject matter and contextual references. Students explore more personalised themes and topics as they progress to GCSE and A-level. The curriculum is well planned to support students' progression and skills development, but subject leaders acknowledge that more could be done to encourage students to push the boundaries of their experiences by working in less familiar contexts.
- From Year 9 students learn to use digital media so that they can use these techniques independently in their GCSE and A-level work. AS and A-level photography students demonstrate a high level of confidence and competence in using professional software to create and manipulate experimental photographic images and text. Students' use of digital media has not extended to exploring the possibilities of moving image, animation or projected images.
- Sixth form students benefit from well planned opportunities to study art works at first hand and to conduct visual research on location, including residential study visits to London and abroad and local trips to Bristol. Year 12 photography students, working with a practising photographer, experimented with pinhole cameras at the start of their course. Year 11 textiles students visit relevant exhibitions but, since the re-organisation of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, younger students no longer benefit from the trip to the Forest of Dean, where Year 8 students previously made their own work in response to the sculpture sited in the forest.
- Students receive useful information about progression opportunities in art and design and related course information, but their knowledge and understanding of employment within the creative industries is underdeveloped.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design

The effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design is outstanding.

- The head of faculty for art, design and technology and the subject leader for art work closely together to create a culture where high expectations and ambitious, challenging targets are the norm. Teachers share ideas and good practice through regular meetings and peer observation. The faculty is one of two leading the whole school literacy strategy. The effective

integration of literacy skills in lessons is having a positive effect on enhancing students' written and verbal analysis and evaluation of art work.

- Subject self-evaluation clearly identifies where further improvements can be made, and resulting actions are having a demonstrable impact on raising achievement. Analysis of performance data does not yet extend to how well students perform against specific assessment criteria, to enable the school to target improvement strategies more sharply, for example, in increasing the proportion of boys who attain the highest grades.
- Subject leaders ensure that parents are well informed about course requirements and assessments by putting all schemes of work, project briefs and assessment guidance on the virtual learning environment. This very useful resource includes examples of work and support for students' analysis and evaluation of art work.
- Students' achievement is celebrated through vibrant displays of student work in art rooms and throughout the school. Teachers make excellent use of students' work as exemplars to promote aspiration and high achievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- Increase the attainment of high grades in GCSE and A-level examinations further through:
 - encouraging students to take more creative risks and work beyond their familiar experiences
 - ensuring that students in all key stages see artists' work at first hand to enhance their understanding of how creative practitioners work, and of employment opportunities in the creative industries
 - a closer analysis of students' achievement in specific aspects of work to pinpoint more accurately where further improvements can be made, particularly in raising higher grade attainment for boys.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop art, craft and design in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Janet Mercer
Her Majesty's Inspector